

# [***Portugal is in suspense after an election produces no clear winner and a surging populist party***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BHP-SBY1-JC5B-G0T3-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

LISBON, Portugal — Portugal’s political future is hanging in the balance after a general election Sunday, with two moderate mainstream parties closely contesting the race and set to wait weeks for a decision on the winner after an unprecedented surge in support for a populist party that finished third.

The center-right Social Democrat-led Democratic Alliance won 79 seats in the 230-seat National Assembly, Portugal’s Parliament, after all votes cast in Portugal were counted.

The center-left Socialist Party, in power the past eight years, got 77 seats.

The deciding votes will come from voters abroad to distrubte the final four parliamentary seats after an election night full of suspense. That count could take more than two weeks.

The hard-right Chega (Enough) party came in third with 48 seats, a milestone result that presented an unprecedented challenge to ***politics***-as-usual, underscoring a [*drift to the right in the European Union*](https://apnews.com/article/democracy-europe-populist-far-right-dutch-poland-a16e22da1f62ca6940bab4749fae7ee6).

Smaller parties took the rest of the vote in an election that saw turnout rise to 66%, the highest level in Portugal for years.

The moderate Social Democrats and Socialists have alternated in power for decades in Portugal, and the surge in support for a radical right party pointed to a significant shift in Portugal’s political landscape and likely heralded a period of political uncertainty.

A minority government that has fewer than 116 seats in Parliament is at the mercy of opposition parties when it tries to pass legislation. Chega's support could hold the key to a functioning government for the Social Democrats.

Chega, just five years old, tripled its vote from the last election in 2022. The result positioned the party as a kingmaker that potentially could hand the Social Democrats a parliamentary majority.

Whatever happens, Chega can no longer be ignored despite attempts to shun it by the mainstream parties.

“One thing is for sure tonight, the two-party system in Portugal is finished,” said Chega leader Andre Ventura.

He insisted that the Social Democrats should ally with Chega in parliament to create a majority. “We have a mandate to govern,” he said.

But Social Democrat leader Luis Montenegro, who likely would become prime minister if his alliance wins, said he would keep his campaign promise to shut out Chega and refuse to negotiate power-sharing with the populists. He said he expected to form a government on his own.

Ventura, a former law professor and television soccer pundit, has said he is prepared to drop some of his party’s most controversial proposals — such as chemical castration for some sex offenders and the introduction of life prison sentences — if that enables his party’s inclusion in a possible governing alliance with other right-of-center parties.

His insistence on national sovereignty instead of closer European Union integration and his plan to grant police the right to strike are other issues that could thwart his ambitions to enter a government coalition, however.

Chega ran its campaign largely on an anti-corruption platform. Graft scandals triggered the early election after former Socialist leader António Costa resigned in November after eight years as prime minister [*amid a corruption investigation*](https://apnews.com/article/portugal-corruption-arrests-costa-935d9f33c9e5179e920dc7e1bcd95eea) involving his chief of staff. Costa hasn’t been accused of any crime.

That episode appeared to have hurt the Socialists at the ballot box.

Public frustration with ***politics***-as-usual had already been percolating before the outcries over graft. Low wages and a high cost of living — worsened last year by surges in inflation and interest rates — coupled with a housing crisis and failings in public health care contributed to the disgruntlement.

The discontent has been further stirred up by Chega.

Sonia Ferreira, a 55-year-old financial manager voting in Lisbon, said the ballot is “decisive” because the continent needs to halt the growth of hard-right parties.

“We are seeing very extremist movements across the European Union and we must all be very careful,” she said.

The Social Democrats, too, were embarrassed just before the campaign by a graft scandal that brought the resignation of two prominent party officials.

Meanwhile, voters have expressed alarm at Portugal’s living standards as financial pressures mount.

An influx of foreign real estate investors and tourists seeking short-term rentals brought a spike in house prices, especially in big cities such as the capital Lisbon where many locals are being priced out of the market.

The economy feels stuck in a low gear. The Portuguese, who have long been among Western Europe’s lowest earners, received an average monthly wage before tax last year of around 1,500 euros ($1,640) — barely enough to rent a one-bedroom flat in Lisbon. Close to 3 million Portuguese workers earn less than 1,000 euros ($1,093) a month.

The number of people without an assigned family doctor, meantime, rose to 1.7 million last year, the highest number ever and up from 1.4 million in 2022.

Ventura, the Chega leader, cannily plugged into the dissatisfaction and has built a following among young people on social media.

Ventura has had a colorful career. He has gone from a practicing lawyer and university professor specializing in tax law to a boisterous television soccer pundit, an author of low-brow books and a bombastic orator on the campaign trail.

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Helena Alves contributed to this report.

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